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The Navajo Indians

An Ethnological Study

BY

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The Navajo Indians*

An Ethnological Study

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THE NAVAJO Indians of our great Southwest have roamed the plains for countless years. They form a part of the great Tinné family and are a branch of the Athabascan stock whose representatives may be found from Alaska to Mexico. The name Navajo was probably applied by the Spaniards, and from the earliest times we hear of these nomads as a band of wild and marauding savages.

In the semi-historic days, when the venturesome Don invaded their domains, we know they were a blood-thirsty and treacherous people; later, when the adobe towns sprang from the desert sands, they plundered and murdered on all sides; even when our troops went among them to bring order out of chaos and to instil a feeling of security into the hearts of the settlers, they proved to be as wild and treacherous as ever.

After 1846 a Navajo campaign was an annual occurrence; treaties were made and broken, valuable lives were lost, and much time consumed in worthless bickering; cattle and sheep were stolen from the Spaniards and it was the sheep that helped to make the Navajos a self-sustaining tribe.

Thus we see what the Navajo has been; for nearly three hundred years he waged an almost ceaseless war or levied tribute upon the poor sedentary tribes, but the development of the sheep industry has had an elevating tendency, it has strengthened him tribally and has also furnished a practical means of support.

The sheep that the Spaniards introduced were destined to work out the Navajos' salvation. The nuclei of the Indian flocks were acquired by theft; then the government, realizing the pastoral tendency of its wards, distributed many thousand more among the families, in an endeavor to better the grade and thereby make the wool more marketable. Thus the Indian advanced; as a consumer he was, no doubt, on a par with the other tribes

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of the plains ; but from the evidence at hand it is quite apparent that he was not a producer ; he probably learned the blanket industry from the Pueblos, but few, if any blankets were made until after the conquest ; but though the wool was obtained from the invaders we find that the ancient loom of the Pueblos was retained.

The early "serape Navajo" was made from the bayeta strands, obtained by raveling the Spanish cloth, and it was woven so cleverly and with such infinite care that it was almost waterproof. In making these blankets only native implements were used ; later, when the crude wool was pressed into service, the foreign shears and cards were adopted ; but they have never cared to use the other appliances of the white man. At the present time the two objects mentioned are the only ones savoring of white influence that may be noticed in their blanket kit. In this work they have distanced their teachers, and have succeeded in developing the art to a greater degree than any other Indians north of Mexico, at least in historic times. This new industry has proved to be a civilizing agent of wonderful efficiency and has made a peaceful tribe from what was once a band as wild as the Apaches.

The land now occupied by the Navajos is naturally adapted to the sheep industry ; the winters are mild, as a rule, and there is generally an abundance of grass ; but the great and all-essential-life-sustainer is lacking, and this scarcity of water is really the all-absorbing topic of whites as well as natives in the great Southwest. There are spring and autumn rains or showers, as a rule, but at times, almost a year will pass without enough water falling to fill the pockets in the rocks ; at such times the Indian endeavors by songs and dances to propitiate the rain-gods and cause them to let fall the precious liquid that they are withholding ; when their sheep and horses are dying from thirst they will dance continuously for weeks and then, in despair make a forced drive across the fiery, alkaline plains to the mountains, where the streams will furnish what the gods of the plains will not ; but in such a drive their flocks are so decimated that it hardly pays to make the effort.

The government gave the Indians the sheep and even now

stipulates how many may be sold by an individual ; now the question naturally arises, why do the officials fail to help the savage in this his greatest difficulty ? Why do they not dig wells that may be used when the surface supply is exhausted ? The answer to such a question would probably be that there is no water obtainable, as that is the usual answer, but experience has shown the writer the fallacy of such a statement. For two years our party relied upon the surface water in the Navajo country, but the third year, in digging a reservoir to catch the seep from an arroyo, a water-bearing stratum was reached ; below this there was a layer of quicksand ; a foot deeper we came to water-bearing gravel that furnished water for our stock, and also for all the Indian stock in the vicinity. The supply seems inexhaustible and on feast occasions from 200 to 300 head of stock have been watered there in a single day. Navajos travel for miles to fill their kegs from this pure source and none were more surprised than they when it was first discovered ; this is not an isolated case, for another well, sunk by our party about thirty miles distant from the one mentioned was fully successful. Here we have a well, the first mentioned, only twenty-five feet deep, supplying enough to tide over a very dry season—a simple illustration that serves to show what the government might do to help the Navajos.

The spring in Keam's Canon, Arizona, was bought for the use of the Moqui Indians at a great outlay—now why not do as much for the poor nomads ? Let it be understood that the Navajos are not lazy ; great dams are built by them in order that the rains may be retained in reservoirs, and these dams are repaired every year ; therefore, with the Indian's heart in his work, it would require but a moderate outlay of money and time to dot their reservation with wells such as I have mentioned, for none are more willing to work, nor can better laborers be found, in sinking such shafts, than the Navajos.

As the people are still nomads from necessity, if not from choice, it would seem that the raising of crops would be attended with difficulties that would make farming almost impossible ; the flocks must be moved from place to place, in order that good pastures and water may be found ; and, to

insure even a fair crop, the field needs constant attention. To the average man these conditions would present a rather perplexing problem, and it would no doubt be the same with the Indian, were it not for the fact that he does not believe in monogamy; his wives serve to simplify the question, and as a rule, a happy division of labor is the result.

A young man will oftentimes buy an old squaw, as they may be had for a few horses; squaws when first sold bring from twelve to fifteen horses, each future sale decreasing their value one animal. In buying an old squaw a young man usually obtains a sort of guardianship over a flock of sheep; but though the squaw becomes his wife, he has in no way a claim on her flocks, as the laws of ownership among them are as rigid as the laws of the Medes and Persians, and the rights of the squaws are seldom if ever questioned. As the buck can derive no revenue from the sheep until they become his personal property, he at once begins to scheme and beg and eventually obtains enough sheep to buy a herd of horses, some of which enable him to introduce a younger squaw to the home.

When a man has from three to five squaws the labor question is readily handled. I remember one medicine-man in particular who had one squaw making blankets, another watching the flocks, a third taking care of his corn-fields, while his favorite was always in camp with him, and she, strange to say, was the oldest of the quartet. He seemed to think a great deal of her and wherever he went she was his companion, and thus it has been, to my personal knowledge, for over four years.

The gardens are usually in the canon-bottoms near the base of the mesa, or table-lands, for in such places there is enough nutriment in the soil to assure a fair crop; another advantage of such a place is in the drainage from the mesa after even a light shower; this natural drainage-system affords a double supply of water from each shower and this is, in most cases, the only irrigation that is used although a few of the more advanced Navajos use artificial means. Corn is raised in abundance, that being their mainstay, but squashes, melons, and beans are also grown; they have not enough foresight to put aside the surplus, as do the Moquis, but dispose of their

corn to the traders, only to rebuy at a great advance during the winter or when the planting time comes in the spring.

While guarding and attending to the corn, the squaw occupies a brush-shelter or wickyup, which is in fact the general type of the summer lodge. There are two primitive forms of houses that are still used by the Navajos, the most compact and permanent being the winter hogan, which is composed of a circular wall of stones, from three to five feet high upon which is built a roof of cedar logs; an opening is left in the top to serve as a chimney and a break in the wall of stones constitutes the doorway, which is generally closed with a blanket; in the better houses of this class there is an approach or closed passage, which allows of two blankets being used in cold weather. Another form of the winter hogan, which is possibly more common than the one just mentioned, is made of logs and built in a conical shape, the whole exterior being covered with sod and earth.

The summer hut or wickyup, is merely a shelter or protection from the sun and rain; in making it a few trees or boughs are thrust into the ground in the form of a semi-circle, the open spaces being filled with greasewood boughs; a roof is sometimes made of the same material, but more often a blanket or piece of old canvas is now substituted. The open side of these houses is generally toward the north and when well built, they afford considerable shelter even in a hard shower.

Some of the natives prefer the rock-shelter during the summer months; this type of dwelling is merely the utilization of natural shade. At times the large masses of rocks at the base of the mesa are selected, again the arroyo benches are used, the main object being to have a comfortable place where the blanket-industry may be carried on. Many of the Navajos are using tents, which they get from the traders, and some have even copied after the Mexicans and built adobe houses; but the latter form of dwelling can never be adopted generally until the ancient tribal beliefs have been eradicated; death still holds the key to the situation and it will take a number of years to cause even the rising generation to see the error of their ways. They will use nothing that the shadow of death has touched, and to keep the material from doing harm, the

the house with all its contents is burned as soon after the burial as possible.

The Navajo, unlike the Mexican, is mortally afraid of disease; when smallpox is prevalent in a Mexican town, no precautions are taken; the people are fatalists and believe that nothing can prevent one's having the disease if it is so willed, and they will allow a stranger to enter a house where the disease is raging, without even a word of warning. The Indians, on the contrary, fear the plague as they do death itself, and when one realizes that he is in the grasp of the dread malady, he will, as a rule, wander off to the hills, and drawing his blanket about him, await the end, which is very often caused by starvation rather than by the disease.

A very pathetic case came to my notice in the summer of 1898. A clever little Indian boy who had done odd jobs about camp during the previous summer, did not put in an appearance, and upon inquiring into the matter I learned that he had been one of the smallpox victims of the previous winter. A companion who had spent the winter in camp, told me the circumstances of the case and they seemed so inhuman as to be almost incredible. The poor little fellow had been taken with the disease and had started at once for an old deserted hogan on the mesa. The food at hand he carried with him, and from the distant hills his friends could see that he was improving; but as the food gave out he grew weaker until at last he died from utter starvation, and that, too, within sight of his own people; the Indians themselves corroborated the story and acknowledged that it was their great dread of the disease that caused them to neglect him.

What is needed among these nomads is a corps of able workers; men who understand medicine and who can teach the medicine-men the modern methods and the use of drugs; the native doctors know little or nothing save the songs and dances and the elaborate sand-paintings that accompany their charms and prayers. While doctoring a young buck a curious thing occurred that served to show that the medicine-men are, to a great degree, charlatans, and do not believe in their own work. I was busy with my patient one morning when the

mother approached ; the father, who was sitting just outside the door of the hogan, told her to keep away. As he was an old medicine-man I told him to come in and then explained the use of the various surgical tools that were in the case and showed him the medicines that were being used ; he did not speak for some time, but noting the effect of the curative agents, he said in a slow, measured tone, "Pellicana azay behasan dohia" (American medicine understand a great deal), then he went on to say that in his practice colored clays and stones were used, but that they did no good, the patient only thought so, which was one way of saying that what he used was simply mind-cure. I was glad to hear this from an old medicine-man of good standing for it served to show how readily they would accept a new regime in the medicine world.

There is a great field for earnest workers among the members of this more than active tribe, and all efforts, if properly put forth, will meet with the hearty approval of the Indian, for he is bright, energetic, and anxious to learn the way of his white neighbors. The government is assisting in a general way and various societies are doing a world of good, notably the New York City Indian Association, which has built an industrial school and a hospital near the reservation in New Mexico ; but this is only a beginning ; let us hope that new efforts may be made and that ere long the tide of public feeling will turn in favor of the Indian, and especially in the direction of the deserving Navajos.